

# LORD AND BONDSMAN ON THE COUCH

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There is perhaps no other passage in the history of philosophy which has met with such a delirium of interpretations and so much scrutiny as the couple of pages where Hegel deals with the dialectic of lord and bondsman.<sup>1</sup> The passage presents a scene which is both spectacular and overladen with metaphysical hidden meanings and consequences. It has often served—mistakenly so, I think—as a touchstone of the Hegelian enterprise as a whole, a clue to his project. Can the Lacanian reading, with this abundance of conflicting views where everything seems to have been said, all the approaches already tried, significantly add to the delirium? Since any delirium worthy of its name

should have a method, I shall proceed systematically in eight consecutive steps.

The discussion of lord and bondsman presents, in an oblique way, Hegel's own peculiar version of the *cogito*, of the advent of self-consciousness. Its textual place is significant: it occurs in the second part of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, the part entitled "Self-consciousness", after the first part, "Consciousness". It is obvious at first glance that self-consciousness, for Hegel, is not a starting point, a secure rock of clear and distinct self-certainty on which to build all the rest, but that it is itself produced, a result of a lengthy previous development of consciousness which has been led, by a rather tortuous way, to become self-consciousness.

Consciousness was defined by an opposition, by its relation to an externality, an object opposed to it, in which it sought the immediate support of its knowledge, the base of certainty to attain truth. When this endeavour fails—in the three stages of the vanishing "this" in sense-certainty, of the thing and its properties in perception and of the internal play of forces and the laws beyond appearance in understanding—it is led to a decisive step of grasping itself in this other opposed to it, in a self-reflective turn where the boundary between itself and its other has to be abandoned; what appeared to be an external limit turns into an internal difference falling into consciousness itself. Through this self-reflective structure, consciousness ceases to be consciousness and turns out to be a subject—one can conceive this passage, perhaps in most economical way, in Lacanian terms, as the shift from consciousness as imaginary to the subject of the symbolic, designated by Lacan as \$.

Hegel underlines in most dramatic terms the importance of this moment: we have now entered the "native realm of truth", "consciousness is to itself the truth", "*being-in-itself* and *being-for-an-other* are one and the same" (104). The dualism which constituted consciousness—its being caught in an internal/external division—has fallen away, all the preceding differences have been superseded. The other seems retrospectively never to have been anything else but consciousness's own other, constituted by it, it had just failed to recognize itself in it.

1. Let us start with the notion of desire that Hegel introduces at a certain point of his argument (too long to be developed here). In the circular self-reproduction of life, a particular living creature can only assert itself in its discontinuity by setting itself against the circle of life: life sets itself against life in a negative relation, aiming

at the abolition of the independence of the life opposed to it. The opposing objectivity is posed as the object of desire and its satisfaction, but the structure of desire is such that it cannot be satisfied with any particular object. In every object, it experiences that "this is not it". Desire opens a crack, it is a persistent void that no object can fill—a void persisting in the very satisfaction of needs, the empty place of subjectivity.

This was taken as the starting point by Kojève as well as by Lacan who was Kojève's student in the course of his famous lectures in the period 1933–39 and who has acquired from him—unfortunately, one should add—the basic perspective. Kojève was particularly responsible for the illusion that we are here dealing with the emergence of Man from a "biological" background, and thus with the emphatic, true beginning of the *Phenomenology*. There is the mistaken assumption that this is the place of the (historic?) origin of self-consciousness and the key to the interpretation of the whole. Hegel's argument follows an entirely different logic, but this must be put aside for our present purpose. The Lacanian reading of Hegel, as we shall see, although constantly moving on Kojève's ground, is not at all exhausted by this framework.

The first Lacanian point springs from the central thesis that desire can only be "satisfied" by another desire. If there is no object which could fill the lack of desire, its only appropriate "object" can be another lack, a negativity identical to its own. It is only when desire encounters, in the field of objectivity, another desire, it can reflectively "come to itself" as desire. The negative relation to the genus must be doubled, it must enter into a negative relation to itself and become "a double reflection, duplication of self-consciousness" (110). Hence the famous formula that Lacan never tires of repeating: the desire is the desire of desire, or in the better known version, the desire is the desire of the other (cf. Lacan 1966: 98, 121, 181, 268, 279, 343, 693 etc.; 1991: 106 etc.). The point follows from Kojève:

In order to proceed to Self-consciousness, Desire must refer to a non-natural object, something that surpasses the given reality. The only entity surpassing the given reality is Desire itself. For Desire as Desire, before its satisfaction, is in fact nothing but a revealed nothing, an unreal void. If Desire is revelation of a void, the presence of an absence of certain reality, it is essentially something else than the desired thing, something else than a thing as a static and given real being perpetually maintaining itself in its self-identity.

Desire that relates to another Desire as Desire will create, by its negating and assimilating activity, an Ego which differs essentially from the animal 'Ego'. . . . Human history is the history of desired Desires. (Kojève 1979: 12–13; *et passim*)

This is the topic that Lacan will take up in order to accomplish a paradoxical tour de force: he will find, in the Hegelian notion of desire (*Begierde*), the “philosophical” backing for the Freudian notion of wish (*Wunsch*). The immediate gain is twofold: on one hand, desire is always “intersubjective”, the relation to the desired object is always essentially mediated by relation to another subjectivity on which it depends by its nature—the desire of an object is derivative of the desire of the other; on the other hand, this sheds new light on the distinction between need and desire (which Lacan will develop into the famous triad “need—demand—desire”)—desire is what remains unsatisfied in the satisfaction of needs, the eternal “this is not it” (particularly salient in hysteria). Both points match two basic psychoanalytic insights. The formula that “desire is desire of the other” is thus the point of intersection of a particular step in Hegel’s development with the structure of desire as discovered by psychoanalysis.—One may be tempted here to enter into all kinds of Hegelian-Lacanian speculations, but one should bear in mind that this conjunction is neither Hegel’s nor Lacan’s last word on the subject.

Lacan’s starting point in the thirties was the insight into the mirror stage as constitutive of the Ego. By this device, he tried to show that the identity of the Ego—the vantage point of “Ego-psychology”—was something that “came from the outside” and was constituted by an imaginary identification, the identification with an outside image. Lacan thus turned the Ego into a place of recognition/miscognition, of a blinding, rather than allowing to remain a stronghold and universal remedy. The problem arose: how does the unconscious desire (and its relation to language)—the central point in psychoanalytic discovery—relate to this dual specular relationship that produces the Ego? How to conceive the relation between the subject of desire and the imaginary Ego?

The Hegelian model offers an elegant solution with the mechanism of a non-imaginary identification. The negativity of desire that can only “reflect itself” in another desire, implies a subject that lacks any imaginary substance, since desire is essentially beyond its objects and a pure non-identity with itself. If there is a recognition in another desire, it is not a recognition in an image, but through something that surpasses any possible image or objectification.

The recognition becomes a relation between two lacks, not a relation to an image or the other as an imaginary double. The identification through desire constitutes a place of the subject as irreducible to any representation, beyond possible representation. No image can fill the lack of desire. The image is thus turned into a sort of a “negative mirror”, something in which desire cannot recognize itself as desire (Borch-Jacobsen 1991); recognition is a recognition in non-recognition itself. The entrance into the realm of self-consciousness is thus not a self-representation of consciousness, but its inherent impossibility, it depends on the subject beyond image, beyond representation, beyond Ego and beyond consciousness.

From this point, there is only a small step to the insight that the lack constitutive of desire coincides with the lack implied by the signifying structure, by the function of speech. In a way, this step was accomplished by Hegel already in the opening argument of sense-certainty, and the link between the negativity of desire and the negativity of speech in Hegel was already seen by Kojève. There is thus a direct line that leads from the imaginary Ego to the subject as a lack “reflected” in the desire of the other, to, finally, the Other as a place beyond the others, a symbolic place embodied in the structure of the language, the non-imaginary counterpart of the subject. This Other constitutes the heteronomy of the subject, it is the Other that “speaks” in the unconscious, where I cannot recognize myself.

Who, then, is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who agitates me?—His presence can be understood only at a second degree of otherness, which already places him in the position of mediating between me and the double of myself, as it were with my counterpart.—If I have said that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other (with a capital O), it is in order to indicate the beyond in which the recognition of desire is bound up with the desire for recognition. (Lacan 1977: 172)

So there is a particular point in Hegel’s argument which is taken as a link in the Lacanian development, the link that brings together the mirror, the Ego, the subject, the lack and the Other. This clarifies a great deal of the development of the “early” Lacan. The problematic side of this connection, though, is the way that Lacan’s own reading of Hegel was thoroughly framed by Kojève. This framework is something that he will never really be able to

get rid of—when he will later come to his criticism of Hegel, it will always be Kojève's Hegel that he will criticize. Yet, by a paradoxical twist, this criticism of Hegel will bring him much closer to Hegel's position than could be possible through Kojève's mediation.<sup>2</sup>

2. Desire as desire of the other leads to an unsolvable impasse. Self-consciousness can only emerge if it is recognized by another self-consciousness; since both desires are after the same thing—recognition by the other—they can only engage in a struggle to death. The autonomy of the other has to be both abolished and maintained, if there is to be a recognition—its “condition of possibility” at the same time hinders its autonomy and makes self-consciousness impossible. The blow directed to the other is a blow to oneself, killing the other is also suicide, the victory is defeat, since there can be no recognition. Self-consciousness may well risk its life and thus prove its freedom from any links of substantiality, but it must also concede that “life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness” (115).

This impasse is resolved, as is well known, in the relation of lordship and bondage: the bondsman chooses a life deprived of autonomy, rather than pursue the struggle to the end; he is willing to concede defeat and remain alive. Self-consciousness and life are split into two subjects: the lord who chooses self-consciousness over life, and the bondsman who clings to life at the price of autonomy. If the struggle is the result of the paradox of desire, then it could only be resolved through the fact that one of the subjects gave way as to his desire (*céder sur son désir*), as the famous Lacanian formula goes, while the other one could gain legitimacy as master by persevering in his desire. Yet, this resolution also implies that the lord as well did not pursue the struggle to the end: he left the bondsman alive, satisfying himself with a “symbolic” recognition. The bondsman accepts symbolic death in order to retain “real” life, the lord accepts symbolic victory rather than “real” annihilation. So at a certain point, both of them have to give up the struggle and enter into a contract, a pact, if there is to be a resolution.

But precisely because it is drawn into the function of the stakes . . . death shows by the same token what is elided from a prior rule, and from the ultimate rule. For, in the end, the loser must not perish if he is to become a slave. In other words, the pact is everywhere anterior to the violence before perpetuating it. . . . (Lacan 1977: 308)

There is a symbolic pact that precedes the bitter struggle and regulates it, and this is the only way out of the predicament. The intersubjectivity of self-consciousness is thus no longer confined to the realm of mutual recognition, it has to be placed in the realm of the Other as the third instance, as the bearer of the symbolic pact. The dual relationship, the duplication of self-consciousness, can only come to an outcome if there is a third. The structure of self-consciousness is a triple one: not just the duplication of the lack in its double reflection, but the third that reflects the double reflection and endows it with a “positive” meaning, their pivotal point.

3. Lacan’s quotation continues as follows:

. . . and what I call the symbolic dominates the imaginary, which is why one may ask oneself whether murder is the absolute Master. — For it is not enough to decide on the basis of its effect—Death. It still remains to be decided which death, that which is brought by life or that which brings life *<celle que porte la vie ou celle qui la porte>*. (Lacan 1977: 308)

Death is, for Hegel, the “absolute Lord” (117) which presents the ultimate fear of the bondsman when he rather clings to his survival, but by this turn, death becomes an entity inscribed in the symbolic, not any more just an absolute limit to life, but something that “bears” or “carries” it. Every lord thus appears as the representative of the absolute Lord, as the metonymy of the last term which itself does not occur. *The lord is the deferment of the absolute Lord*, its economizing and thus its symbolic “presence”. The ultimate term defines and founds domination, though it is itself lacking. The lord may be the lord over life and death, yet he is the lord only insofar as he leaves his subjects alive. Servitude is thus confined precisely to the realm “between two deaths” opened by the Symbolic (in a footnote, Lacan here refers to his seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* where he introduced the notion of the “second death”). — One should also read the implication the other way round: the Symbolic is precisely this “economizing death”, death postponed, the economy of death, its repetition which now comes to be the bearer of life.

4. The bondsman has become bondsman since he was unable to cut his ties of substantiality, to persist in the absolute negativity in relation to thinghood in general, and he has therefore become tied to the Thing. The Thing as immediate being is what “holds the bondsman in bondage; it is his chain from which he could not

break free in the struggle, thus proving himself to be dependent" (115). The same bond that binds him to the lord binds him also to thinghood. The lord can maintain his negative relation by interposing the bondsman between himself and things, which results in the double relation of self-consciousness to the thinghood: enjoyment (*Genuß*) which belongs to the lord, and work which belongs to the bondsman. Work, in the service of lord's desire, "the discipline of service and obedience" (119), is itself "desire held in check, fleetingness staved off" (118), a deferred enjoyment, which will, in the long process of *Bildung*, come to shape the inner and outer nature and endow it with the form of self-consciousness. The fear of death as the absolute Lord, which the bondsman has experienced, has shaken every fixity, "his whole being has been seized with dread . . . and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations" (117). Work is the "practical, material realization" of this fear, the actual abolition of the solid and stable immediacy which is formed by self-consciousness through *Bildung*. What appeared as a foreign negative power against the subject, is now seen to be the negative power of self-consciousness itself.

If it seems so far that Lacan has been largely following Hegel's steps and using them as particular insights for his own purposes, it is here that Lacan's reading turns against Hegel, focusing on a point that seems to escape Hegel, but which is essential for the psychoanalytic view. The bondsman's attitude can be seen as sharing the structure of what psychoanalysis has pinpointed as obsessional neurosis. If the bondsman should find himself on the couch, the diagnosis would be apparent: an obsessional.

In fact the obsessional subject manifests one of the attitudes that Hegel did not develop in his dialectic of the master and the slave. The slave has given way in face of the risk of death in which mastery was being offered to him in a struggle of pure prestige. But since he knows that he is mortal, he also knows that the master can die. From this moment on he is able to accept his labouring for the master and his renunciation of pleasure in the meantime; and, in the uncertainty of the moment when the master will die, he waits. (Lacan 1977: 99)

The crucial implication is that the bondsman's impasse is ultimately not the lord who will not let him breathe freely, who hinders his enjoyment and prevents him from being himself. The impasse rather springs from bondsman's fantasy—the fantasy of



the lord's death, the fantasy of the lord's enjoyment—that makes him a bondsman and maintains his servitude. If the lord is only possible as a deferment of the absolute Lord, death, this appears, from the bondsman's point of view, as the deferment of lord's death, as waiting for it, expecting the moment when he will finally be able to be himself, to fully assume his subjectivity. He cannot kill the lord—he became bondsman in the first place because he could not do it—so he can only hope for the lord's death and wait for it, that is, he can only die while remaining alive until the anticipated death of the lord. If the lord was the deferment of death, the bondsman responds to it by economizing his own death, repeating it, identifying with the dead lord. This is the “death that bears life”.

The bondsman thus reveals, in an exemplary form, the inner blockage of the subject, but that which seems to prevent subjectivity ultimately coincides with the subject itself. The illusion of the subject is that it will fully become a subject with the liberation from the outer coercion and repression. He fails to see that the external hindrance is nothing but positivation of its internal hindrance—the liberation from the lord would not finally yield the full enjoyment, it would entail the emergence of the true nature of its impasse, its own inner limit, the impossibility of being the subject.

That would be the last lesson of the famous Hegelian dialectics of the Lord and the Bondsman . . . : the Lord is ultimately an invention of the Bondsman, a way for the Bondsman to ‘give way as to his desire’, to evade the blockage of his own desire by projecting its reason into the external repression of the Lord. (Žižek 1990: 252)

Lordship can be effective only through the bondsman's fantasy—while the work he performs, on the other hand, can be seen as his symptom. If lordship is a symbolic relation—not something based on external repression—then fantasy is the way that this relation can be actual for the subject, the minimal part of “illusion” necessary for domination. It can perhaps be best described as the hypothesis of a “subject supposed to enjoy”—the supposition of a full enjoyment in the other, the “theft of enjoyment” that supports the renunciation of enjoyment and produces procrastination, the postponement of one's becoming a subject. The bondsman is a subject only insofar as he cannot become one, the subject in suspense.

5. It is here that Lacan's criticism of Hegel's model takes a decisive, perhaps the most important turn. The bondsman renounces enjoyment by ascribing it to the lord, but this renunciation itself produces an enjoyment—a paradoxical “surplus enjoyment” that endorses renunciation. The bondsman may well be waiting for some moment of access to the “real” enjoyment, but in this deferment of enjoyment he nevertheless “enjoys”. For Hegel, the opposition is between the lord's enjoyment and the bondsman's work, but for Lacan, the real problem emerges with the *bondsman's enjoyment*. This is the point with which he tries to undermine Hegel's argument:

The work to which the slave is subjected and the pleasure that he renounces out of fear of death, we are told, will be precisely the way through which he will achieve freedom. There can be no more obvious lure than this, politically or psychologically. *Jouissance* comes easily to the slave, and it will leave the work in bondage. (Lacan 1977: 308)

The bondsman assumes that the lord's enjoyment is what prevents him from being himself, but the real obstacle turns out to be his own enjoyment. This is the source of his internal self-blockage and of his servitude—he is subject to his enjoyment, in both senses of the word.

Two generally accepted theses which make up part of the Hegelian doxa are thus put into question. First, the dialectic of lord and bondsman does not ultimately lead to mutual recognition. Not only does the Hegelian model not offer a clue as to how recognition can be brought about between lords, but the recognition between lord and bondsman is thwarted as well by the initial presuppositions. At the outset, the lord is recognized only by somebody who is not worthy to recognize him, but also in the perspective of the outcome, the bondsman may well present the truth of the lord and “emancipate himself” by his work, but his freedom and autonomy remain framed by his servitude, lacking the voluntary recognition of the lord. Free and mutual recognition cannot be attained on the basis of the dialectic of lord and bondsman alone.

Second, it is true that, for Hegel, the moment of dialectical (and even historical) truth belongs to the bondsman, who is the real subject of the process; but his emancipation cannot be achieved through work. Some Marxist interpreters have seen the Hegelian model as a prefiguration of the class struggle and the perspective

of the final victory of the proletariat. At first sight, it may seem that Hegel's development directly calls for a Marxist sequel. Yet, Hegel's point turns out to be the direct opposite: if, in the Marxist perspective, the process of labour is the starting point from which to explain social relations, domination and ideology as the consciousness that goes along with it, if both domination and ideology only appear at a certain point of the development of labour (with the division of labour etc.), then for Hegel, on the other hand, labour is the result and the consequence of a certain inter-subjective deadlock—domination and ideology have to precede the labour process. Labour can get started only if a subject has already assumed the position of a bondsman and accepted the servitude. Work is for Hegel “alienated” by its very nature, and to supersede this initial alienation, work itself is not sufficient. As work, it is essentially framed by domination, and the bond that ties the bondsman is materialized, for Lacan, in the moment of surplus enjoyment. The framework of work is ultimately not the framework in which the emancipation of self-consciousness can be conceived.

When Lacan fights the dangerous illusion that the work could be the way of realization of the bondsman's freedom, he tries to circumscribe the point that eludes Hegel and to turn it into a basis for his criticism. Yet one could defend Hegel on this point: for him as well work is not the way to emancipation and mutual recognition. This is why the second part of the chapter on self-consciousness, in a dialectical reversal, abandons the notion of labour in favour of “the labour of the Notion” (*die Arbeit des Begriffes*). Work is confined to finitude, or rather “the bad infinity”, it can only eternally shape objectivity and give it the form of self-consciousness, eternally reproducing the subject/object split at the same time as it tries to supersede it; only thought is capable of true infinity, the absolute negative relation to objectivity and the assertion of autonomy, so the following figure in the *Phenomenology*, that of stoicism, starts with autonomy in the realm of thought which can be attained “whether on the throne or in chains” (121). One could say that Lacan's real opponent is rather Kojève's world-historical construction.

So where does the difference really lie between Hegel's model and Lacan's critical account of it? In a certain sense, Hegel would quite agree that the lord is the embodiment of the bondsman's self-blockage and that his status as a subject depends on his non-transparency to himself. But Hegel places the nature of this

self-blockage in the twofold bond to the lord and to the thinghood, whereas for Lacan, his bond is the object of surplus-enjoyment, an object that emerges as a surplus and cannot be a part of objectivity. One can infinitely shape objectivity through work, but there is an object which remains irreducibly heterogenous at the core of this process. Hegel's model, for Lacan, itself implies a different kind of object that eludes Hegel.

For the "early" Lacan, the essential element of this dialectic was the intersubjectivity which implied the Other as its presupposition (one could say as its "transcendental condition"). But gradually, the focus changed—it became centered on the heterogenous object, a non-symbolic and non-symbolizable surplus that eludes both the subject and the Other and at the same time holds them together. The symbolic framework is now itself framed by the relation to the object. Lacan had first pinpointed that moment in the analysis of Socrates' position in the seminar *Le transfert* (*Transference* 1959/60), but this new perspective demanded also a different reading of the Hegelian model. In the seminar *L'Envers de la psychanalyse* (*The reverse side of psychoanalysis* 1969/70), this new approach will be the basis of the famous "theory of four discourses".

6. The result of the development of consciousness, the first part of *Phenomenology*, was the notion of the subject, as opposed to consciousness—the subject that one can designate by the Lacanian matheme  $\$$ . With the passage to self-consciousness, this subject had to be redoubled, the logic of desire was introduced as a consequence of the desubstantialized nature of this subject, yielding the relationship between two lacks. The ensuing life and death struggle could not produce a recognition or a mutuality, but an irreducible asymmetry of the two subjects—the struggle could only be resolved in the framework of the symbolic, with the essentially different status of both subjects and their asymmetry inscribed in the symbolic structure.

This is the starting point of Lacan's concept of the "discourse of the Master". The pact between the lord and the bondsman reduces them to a symbolic representation, and the Lacanian *tour de force* is the insight that their respective symbolic roles could be made to coincide with a basic property of the symbolic structure, the signifying chain, viz. with the elementary asymmetry of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  as the minimal signifying dyad.—As we have seen, subject is subject through the impossibility of its representation, by being unrepresentable, since its place is nothing but a lack,  $\$$ . If it

nevertheless comes to be represented—and this is the Lacanian definition of the signifier, “that which represents the subject for another signifier”—it is only in an inadequate way, but this inadequacy *is* the subject. The very inadequacy of representation is what constitutes it and maintains it as irreducible to representation and also what generates the progression of the signifying chain.

The lord can be effective as the lord only insofar as he is attached to a Master-signifier, *le signifiant-maître*, the signifier without a signified that Lacan designates with  $S_1$ . It gets its special status and authority by being the “representative” of that “absolute Master”, the absent ultimate term of the signifying chain of domination, although it is in itself devoid of meaning. It is this senseless, groundless, “empty” sign that institutes the Master.<sup>3</sup> As a signifier, it is One, exceptional and incomparable. On the other side, the bondsman comes to be represented by  $S_2$  as the condensation of the rest of the signifying chain. It contains by its nature a multiplicity, as opposed to the One, and it is the bearer of signification and knowledge. In the place of the bondsman, there can be a multitude of “subjects” in relation to the Oneness of the lord, and the bondsman is the one who has to possess knowledge, at least the know-how to transform objectivity through work, whereas the lord does not have to know anything—his authority is not an authority based on knowledge.  $S_1$  is an element implied by the chain of knowledge, yet something that cannot be reflexively appropriated by it—as the internal condition of knowledge it escapes knowledge.

The subject,  $\$$ , is thus “solidified” and represented by the relation  $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$ . This is the pact that holds together the lord and the bondsman in its very minimal form.  $S_2$ , the place of the bondsman, is framed on the one hand by its relation to  $S_1$  and on the other by the enjoyment that emerges as a surplus and that gives “substance” to the chain of domination. There is, on the side of the bondsman, the essential tension between knowledge and enjoyment:

. . . in the Hegelian model, there were not four terms, but at the outset just the lord and the bondsman. I designate the bondsman by  $S_2$ , but it can be also identified here with the moment of enjoyment that, first, he did not want to renounce, and second, he nevertheless wanted to, since he substituted it with work which is not its equivalent. (Lacan 1991: 198)

The bondsman attempted to hold onto enjoyment by clinging to life, but he was forced to renounce it if he wanted to survive—and

thus get the paradoxical surplus-enjoyment instead. The lord, on the other hand, was willing to stake his enjoyment and his attachment to life, but he survived his own death, he could capitalize the mortal risk in the symbolic pact that secured his privileged position. But if he gained an initial legitimacy by “not giving way as to his desire”, he was nevertheless willing to do it in the second stage: his enjoyment turned into mere pleasure, the obtuse and “unalloyed feeling of self” (118), fleeting satisfaction. Pleasure is precisely “giving way as to one’s desire” and there can be no more dialectic on the lord’s side. He is ultimately “the castrated Master” (Lacan 1991: 115).

Lacan now criticizes Hegel from another angle: the progression of *Phenomenology* towards absolute knowledge is supposed to be a way for the knowledge to get rid of its entanglement with enjoyment, that heterogenous element lurking behind it. Absolute knowledge would be “the annihilation of what motivates the function of knowledge—its dialectic with enjoyment. Absolute knowledge would be the abolition of this moment” (Lacan 1991: 38). The final triumph of knowledge would mean the final abolition of its internal object in a self-transparency. Hegel is praised as “the most sublime of all hysterics” (ibid.) insofar as the dialectical process is based on a knowledge that does not know itself and can only progress by constant “hysterization”, never being able to meet its own standards. Yet in the end, according to Lacan, Hegel gives up the hysterical position through the illusion of a successful abolition of the object in absolute knowledge.

Throughout his work, Lacan sees absolute knowledge as Hegel’s major sin. On this point, he remains firmly in the framework of the traditional reading which has become a commonplace. The ultimate absolute closure is seen as the greatest all-permeating fault of Hegel and it is considered a sufficient ground for his wholesale rejection (particularly in these post-modern times when openness—getting rid of “big narratives” and the terror of universality—is taken to be a great blessing). Nevertheless, Lacan produced his own version of absolute knowledge in a very different way; without reference to Hegel, he came to the same structural point. The question of the end of analysis presents an analogous problem: a seemingly endless process of “(self)reshaping of the self”, a “working through” and a “progression of knowledge” that nevertheless comes to a closure. He tried to grasp this as the moment of *la passe*, which coincides with “subjective destitution”, a “falling out” of the object, “surpassing the fundamental fantasy”. To put it briefly, *la passe* is the Lacanian version of absolute knowledge

that can retroactively shed an entirely different light on the Hegelian final moment. — But this would demand a lengthy elaboration that exceeds by far the aim of the present paper.

In the revised reading of the lord and bondsman dialectics (Lacan 1991), the four basic elements of the Lacanian algebra fall into place. His ambition—like that of the ancient cosmology—was to reduce “the universe” to just four elements, which, on the basis of this model, also gain a firm inner connection and form the basic structure of the “discourse of the Master”, the most elementary form of discourse. One could write their logical sequence in this way:  $\$ \rightarrow S_1 \rightarrow S_2 \rightarrow a$ . Lacan has given that sequence another twist with the well known formula:

$$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

The linear sequence is shifted by a double division: to put it simply, the left side represents the lord ( $S_1/\$$ ), the right side the bondsman ( $S_2/a$ ); the upper half is the manifest part, the lower half the concealed one, its hidden spring and its product. The *agent* of the discourse is the lord represented by the “Master signifier”; its *other*, the addressee, is the bondsman represented by  $S_2$ , the signifier of knowledge. Its hidden spring or starting point of the discourse, which is also the place of its *truth*, is the void of  $\$$ , the empty place of the subject. Its product is the surplus enjoyment, pinpointed by Lacan as the object  $a$ . In the manifest couple  $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$ , the oppositions One/multitude, power/knowledge and nonsense/sense coincide in the same gesture. The arrow indicates that the relationship runs only in one direction, its retroactivity, its “reflexive determination” must remain hidden if the domination is to work.<sup>4</sup>

On the left side, we have  $\$$  and  $S_1$ .  $S_1$  is the first “senseless” signifier that embodies and fixes the void of  $\$$ , or better, by fixing it it retroactively produces it (since it is an illusion that we have “always already” been subjects prior to the fixation in the signifier—the precondition of subjectivity is the “alienation” in the signifier). On the right, we have the knowledge and the hidden object (of enjoyment) that position the bondsman. These four elements are enough to define and to logically found in a minimal way the structure of discourse (the other three discourses are just transformations, by rotation, of this basic one).

One might object that this solution, elegant and economical as it may be, operates with concepts that do not occur in Hegel’s text. In particular, Hegel never speaks, in this passage, of knowledge or

the enjoyment of the bondsman. Yet, one can argue that Lacan points to the moments that are embedded in the logic of Hegel's development if we put it into perspective.

In his mastering of thinghood, the bondsman must acquire a knowledge in the sense of know-how, a thoroughly practical, "technical" knowledge—i.e. a knowledge that does not yet possess the dignity of the Hegelian Notion. Knowledge can come to itself and become self-conscious only by disengaging itself from this practical-technical constellation—the bondsman will have to turn into a philosopher, and this is precisely what happens in the next stage, with the passage into stoicism. This is also a point that Lacan never tires of repeating: philosophy emerged by an act of "expropriation of knowledge", the "technical" knowledge of the bondsman is seized, "confiscated" by the lord and extricated from its place of origin into the realm of "pure theory"; the *savoir-faire* turned into episteme (Lacan 1991: 21, 22, 91, 173–74 etc.).<sup>5</sup> Lacan calls knowledge something that is for Hegel still an unreflective knowledge, a knowledge "in-itself" that does not yet deserve that name.

The moment of (surplus) enjoyment presents a more difficult problem. Lacan offers a new concept which is correlative to the emergence of the self-conscious subject and embodies its "bar"—a concept that is at the basis of the formation of symptom and fantasy, more complex psychoanalytic mechanisms of grasping the "barred subject". Is this the moment that "constitutively" eludes Hegel, although it constantly haunts his dialectics? Is the psychoanalytic view on this point thus irreconcilably opposed to Hegel?—I can here just hint to two further figures in the subsequent development where Hegel comes surprisingly close to Lacan's point.

First, at the end of the chapter on self-consciousness, at the outcome of the section on "unhappy consciousness", the subject comes to a point where he has to treat himself as a thing ("It has the certainty of truly divesting itself of its 'I', and of having turned its immediate self-consciousness into a *Thing* . . ." (137). He has to renounce all of his worldly possessions, his enjoyment, his ties, his autonomy, his "I". In this universal reduction of subjectivity, the only bit that he cannot give up, in spite of hard efforts, is this Thing which is himself—the internal Thing remaining after the universal reduction of all positivity. It is here that the paradoxical object of surplus enjoyment emerges in its pure form—the object "inside" subjectivity which is both its condition and its obstacle.



Yet it is here that the subject of self-consciousness finally emerges *par excellence*.

Second, a universal reduction is the precondition of the universal subject of reason and forms the passage into the next stage (Reason). But at the end of the first part of Reason, "Observing reason", the heterogenous object reemerges in the form of the skull, that dead senseless Thing which is nevertheless the (only possible) equivalent of the subject. "The being of Spirit is a bone" (208)—this infinite judgment produces a limit of thought, the limit of the Symbolic, an unthinkable heterogenous object,<sup>6</sup> and perhaps holds the clue to the Spirit in its minimal form. —Both points would require much further elaboration. The hints must suffice as a token that Hegel is much more Lacanian than Lacan assumes, and also that Lacan is much more Hegelian than he knows.

Lacan's reading of lord and bondsman finally leads us to an essential point. The usual understanding has it that the realm of consciousness is defined by its relation to the objectivity opposed to it in which it seeks its truth, whereas self-consciousness "turns to itself" by relating to itself in its other. But we have seen that self-consciousness constantly revolves around the obstacle that prevents its completion as self-consciousness and ultimately coincides with this impossibility of becoming self-consciousness. In the realm of consciousness it seemed that the object as the opposed other prevented the attainment of self-consciousness, but perhaps one must entirely turn the perspective: it is only by including objectivity into self-referentiality that the "real" object emerges. Once it liberates itself of objectivity, self-consciousness gets stuck with its inner object. The self-reflexive abolition of objectivity produces the object—in the Lacanian sense. The split between consciousness and objectivity is replaced by the internal split between the subject of self-consciousness and the object—as object *a*.

7. Karen Gloy (1985) has attempted to classify the many various interpretations of lord and bondsman. She proposed a simple dividing line between two rough categories, the material and the formal interpretations. The material ones are those that try to reduce it to an element of contents, a historical, sociological or psychological constellation—the entry into an elementary form of the social and the political, the founding myth of society, the beginning of Antiquity, the bud-form of economic and legal relations etc. (cf. diverse attempts by Kojève, Fetscher, Ottmann, Janke, Kelly, some Marxists and many others). The formal ones

dismiss this historical and social background or reduce it to a mere illustration, they focus instead on the formal, logical progression of categories, the advent of self-referentiality and reflexivity and the deduction of subjectivity implied by the logical structure (cf. e.g. Gadamer, Becker, Heinrichs, Labarrière and some others).

If we take this rough division as a simple guideline, where should one place the Lacanian interpretation? My thesis would be that it occupies a place precisely at the intersection of the two categories. It revolves around the question how a formal structure, reduced to  $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$  and  $\$$  as its retroactive implication, produces a heterogenous “material” element, isolated as the object  $a$ , the element that adds the moment of enjoyment as that which is at stake in the formal structure, its core and its “motor”, yet irreducible to it. It is not the object of work and shaping of objectivity—that object can always be reduced to the structure, i.e. its heterogeneity can be abolished by the form of self-consciousness; it is the surplus, the left-over of this operation, a materiality reduced to its minimal form, prior to any positive contents. The formal interpretations try to get rid of this element in favour of the “purity” of the logical structure, whereas the material ones precipitate themselves into reducing the materiality to a particular positive meaning. The Lacanian reading has the advantage of sticking to the formal structure (what Hegel called “the logic behind consciousness”), showing at the same time that the problem that lies at the core of the *Phenomenology*, the hidden spring of “the experience of consciousness” that pushes it forward and constitutes its internal tension, lies in the relation of the logical structure to the object.

8. One final question remains: what status should one ascribe to this story of lord and bondsman? Did the bitter struggle ever happen at some hypothetical dawn of history? Or is it just a theoretical fantasy?

In his argument, Hegel never gives any grounds for the supposition that he is describing some (pre)historical actual event. Yet, it is a “scenario” that has “actual” and tangible effects and consequences, a theoretical clue to domination, recognition, self-consciousness and the process of labour. By simplifying a little, one could say that it is an “event” that never happened, yet something that has “always already” happened, not a historical genesis of Mankind, but something “always already” presupposed in any account of subjectivity.

It is well known that Hegel’s story had many forerunners in the preceding history of the Enlightenment. One could say that the

basic gesture of the Enlightenment was an attempt to reduce subjectivity to its minimal core, its “zero degree” and to reconstruct everything from there, according to the rules of Reason. One can follow this process in various ways with Descartes’ *cogito*, Locke’s *tabula rasa*, the Enlightenment preoccupation with the blind man as a “non-imaginary subject”, Condillac’s famous statue, Rousseau’s *Emile*, the myth of *le bon sauvage* prior to the entry into culture etc. The crucial result of this endeavour, to put it briefly, was the reduction of the traditional themes of the soul, the individuality, the consciousness etc. and the emergence, for the first time in the history of thought, of the concept of subject, as a locus irreducible to any of these instances. The same general preoccupation also led the attempt to isolate the minimal form of society, often found in the cell of two individuals, a zero degree of the social from which to reconstruct the current corrupt social structures. Hegel’s lord and bondsman have their predecessors in Hobbes, Leibniz, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hume, the “Robinsonades” etc.

But there is an essential difference separating Hegel from this Enlightenment background. He does not attempt to offer a missing link between nature and culture or to translate his theoretical reconstruction into a mythical narration of origins, a legend of anthropogenesis. His only ambition is the retroactive reconstruction of presuppositions; the time of *Phenomenology* runs backwards, by means of an “always already”—consciousness is “always already” self-consciousness, which is in turn “always already” Reason, Spirit etc. The mythical origin is always missing, the end can only refer to the beginning, though a necessarily displaced one—the myth of an origin is an optical illusion. The lord and bondsman scenario as a retroactive reconstruction points to something “always already” past, but a *past that was never present*. This past is inscribed in the inherent tensions of the present structure that press it into new transformations.

The best counterpart to this paradoxical status can perhaps be found not in the Enlightenment narratives, but in Freud’s “scientific myth” of the primal horde and its primal Father—again a story that never happened but which has to be presupposed and reconstructed by its very tangible effects. Both stories share common ambitions: to account for the minimal social tie, the advent of domination, the emergence of the Law, the renunciation of enjoyment, the “origin” of the process of *Bildung*. But Freud’s story is the direct inversion of Hegel’s: the hypothetical “natural” state is the state of “maximal” domination, the primal Father holding all

the power in his hands, being the master over life and death and having exclusive access to enjoyment. The problem is not the emergence of the Lord, this is taken as a “natural fact” (based, e.g., on superior strength), not the first step of culture. The hypothetical “beginning of history” is the murder of this “absolute Lord” and the ensuing result that he “becomes more powerful dead than alive”, transformed into the invisible force of the Law that bars the subjects from enjoyment. The “bondsmen” do not procrastinate and wait for the lord’s death, they become subjects by a decisive action, they act to gain their share of unswerving enjoyment—but this action confronts them with their internal deadlock, their “wish-fulfillment” turns into their obstacle. The symbolic authority can only be a deferment and a substitute for the missing authority of the “absolute Lord”, the impossible enjoyment of the primal Father turns into the injunction of the Superego (which Lacan pinpoints as the imperative “Enjoy!”) that will come perpetually to haunt the symbolic order, confining the subjects to the elusive substitute of “surplus enjoyment”.

The two stories start at opposite ends, yet on closer scrutiny they point in the same direction—that of the “internally barred” subjectivity, the impossible enjoyment, formations of symptom and fantasy—they mutually imply and endorse each other. Freud’s version may be read as the sequel to Hegel’s (what happens after the death of the lord?), or the other way round, Hegel may be seen to continue Freud: how can domination be brought about among structurally equal subjects with equal aspirations, after the death of the absolute Lord—Death itself. For Hegel’s lord can only be a substitute for the absolute Lord, the impossible limit of the Real.

Maybe Lacan’s account of lord and bondsman is ultimately an attempt to reconcile the two stories, to read Hegel with Freud, as it were, and to demonstrate, in this confrontation, the part that has eluded Hegel and that irretrievably separates him from psychoanalysis. But maybe Hegel finally does not emerge as an opponent at all, but rather as the most powerful ally. After all, he was Lacan’s best pupil.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The paper presents a condensed version of a part of an extensive Lacanian reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The condensation—due to limitations of space—is responsible for the rather schematic and dense style as well as for the

omission of numerous references, quotations and examples. The entire text will appear in 1993 in German (with Turia & Kant publishers in Vienna) and hopefully at some future date also in English. — Page references without other qualifications refer to A. V. Miller's version of *Phenomenology* (1977).

<sup>2</sup> Kojève has remained for Lacan the figure of a Master. The anecdote has it that when Kojève died, with the unmistakable sense for historical timing, during the May revolution in 1968, Lacan rushed to his house to obtain Kojève's own personally annotated copy of the *Phenomenology*. — If Kojève was a transference figure for Lacan, one has to bear in mind the nature of transference: the knowledge produced by it is not related to the knowledge of "the subject supposed to know", although the knowledge can only be produced by this necessary illusion.

<sup>3</sup> "To make people work is even more tiresome than to work oneself, if one really had to do it. The Master never does it. He gives a sign, the Master-signifier, and everybody starts running" (Lacan 1991: 202–3). One can see a consequent Hegelian realization of this in the function of the monarch, represented solely by his signature, by dotting the "i's". Cf. Žižek 1991: 81–86, 267–70.

<sup>4</sup> See the famous remark on reflexive determinations by Marx: "One man is a king because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king." (*MEW* 23: 72)

<sup>5</sup> The tie with the enjoyment seems to have been severed here, given the "theoretical" attitude of the observing reason; but in the very next step, the "active reason", the section "Pleasure and necessity", the subject has precisely to make himself a thing in order to join the enjoyment that theory could not yield, to seize the impossible object of enjoyment by his action.

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